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THE ACCEPTED PENITENT

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

Church Penitentiary Association

AT

ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, PICCADILLY

ON

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1861

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VICAR OF BREMHILL, PREBENDARY OF SARUM, CHAPLAIN TO THE LORD BISHOP
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SERMON.

ST. JOHN, xx. 16.

Jesus saith unto her, Mary!

WE have lived to see a revival of many daring and offensive speculations on great cardinal truths of religion. Old thread-bare exceptions to positive statements of Holy Scripture are again raked up and set on high with an industry savouring of other days, and all the time-worn controversy on the possibility of miracles, of any interruption to the ordinary course of nature, is once more exhumed for the plaudits of the multitude, and for discrediting the letter of the Word of God. And so it falls that, as with other doubts and cavillings, the old Corinthian scepticism lives again. A voice is again whispering amongst us that there is no resurrection of the dead: no such resurrection of the body as we in our simplicity have been brought to believe: that the records of the Evangelists want that entire agreement in the details of the narrative, which alone could authenticate the rising of the crucified Jesus: that therefore it ought to be a thing as incredible to us, as it was to King Agrippa, that God should raise the dead.

It is not my business now to defend the Faith. These criticisms have been answered so often and with such overwhelming power, that I am prepared to say, with some of the master-spirits of our Church, that in all the range of history, sacred or profane, nothing is better attested than the blessed Fact, which makes our Easter the queen of festivals, and gives us an assurance of victory over death, and over the grave, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The circumstance, however, in the account of the Resur-

rection, to which I am about to direct your attention, has at any rate this evidence in its favour, that it rests upon the concurring testimony of all the sacred historians. The first to whom Jesus showed Himself after He had risen was Mary Magdalene, the woman of Magdala in Galilee, out of whom He had cast seven devils.

And this is the story of His appearance.

Very early on the morning of Easter Day, Mary of Magdala, with Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had started, while it was yet dark, for the sepulchre. Before they could reach it Jesus had risen. The angel had rolled the stone from the door, the earth was unnaturally convulsed, the astounded sentinels were lying on the ground in misery and terror, as dead men. Bodies of the saints had passed out of their graves, and gone into the holy city, and were appearing there to many—and at this critical moment the women reach the scene. Lo! the seal of the tomb was split and the rock open! Their first thought was that the Corpse of Christ was stolen. Mary does not doubt it for a moment. She straightway runs to Peter and John and informs them of it. “They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid Him.” Peter and John hasten forwards, and find it all true. The grave clothes were on the ground; the napkin folded in a place by itself. All had been done quietly and formally and without hurry; but the Body—was gone! They saw—they wondered—and they went away again to their own homes.

But not so Mary. She clung to that hallowed ground. She could not leave it: she could not go home. If she *had*, she would have found no rest. Her heart was in the grave with Him Who had spoken to her as man never spake, and Who had done for her what man could never do, had healed her of her infirmity whatever it was, restored her to her right mind, and, not as the world giveth, had given peace to her soul. She could not go home. She lingered about the spot; hung over the tomb weeping: and presently, as though moved by some sudden impulse, she stooped down, and through her tears looked in. And, behold, there sat two angels in white, one at the head, the other at the feet, where

the body of Jesus had lain. They say to her, "Woman, why weepest thou?" She answered, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him." And as she spoke she turned herself back, and she saw a man standing. The Man also said to her, "Woman, why weepest thou?" She supposed Him to be the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if thou have borne Him hence, or if thou knowest who have borne Him hence; if thou canst tell me, do for mercy's sake tell me, where hast thou laid Him? and I will take Him away." And so again she covered her face and wept.

The Man said to her, "Mary!"

We all know what magic influence may lie in a word, in a tone, in the softest cadence of a tone: what mysterious sensations a voice may awaken, even the whisper of a well-known, well-loved voice—how it may change the whole current of the thoughts, and send the blood flowing back to the heart. The Man said to her, "*Mary!*" She turned. She sprang towards Him; she would have seized Him, crying "*Rabboni!*" "My Great Master!" (the word means more than Rabbi). Jesus said unto her, "Touch Me not," that is, "Do not cling to Me, do not hold Me. You will see Me often as yet. Do not fear that I am going to leave you immediately. I am not yet ascended to My Father. But go to My brethren, and tell them what you have seen. Tell them that I have risen, and shall presently ascend—yes, ascend to My Father and to your Father, to My God and to your God."

Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken those words to her.

Now a natural question arises, why did Jesus first appear to a woman? Why not to one of His Apostles? Or, if to a woman, why to the Magdalen?—a sinner above most women. For we scarcely doubt that this was the same person as that poor penitent, from whom Simon the Pharisee shrunk as from a plague-spot and defilement. The answer is not far to seek.

By a woman sin first entered into the world. Christ came into the world, "born of a woman," that sin might be destroyed.

The serpent beguiled the woman that she fell. And "the Seed of the woman," sent to bruise the serpent's head, announced first to Mary, "Thou shalt surely rise again."

The Lord God in Eden called aloud to "Eve!" and the guilty creature shrunk back into the thicket to hide. The Son of God at the sepulchre whispered "Mary!" and the joyful penitent rushed wildly to bathe His feet again with her tears, and to wipe them with the hairs of her head.

Unto the woman said God in Paradise, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow." Unto a woman in Joseph's garden Jesus said "Mary"—and the sorrow passed away as a dream in the night.

Thus did God restore woman to her original rank in creation. He lightened the curse that lay upon her. He brought her back from the degradation of a slave to her primitive rank as the helpmate of man. He bid man give her honour, because she was the weaker vessel. He bound her husband to love her, comfort her, keep her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others keep only unto her for life. And so, in a word, He made the barren one to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children.

But if the Redeemer would thus appear to a woman, why did He select Mary of Magdala? Was it in this way that it pleased Him to reward her intense faith and devotion? We assume her to be that sinner in the city of whom He had said, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." Anyhow she must have loved much; and whatever vices those seven devils had wrought in her, she had heard her name called, she had turned, she had repented, she had laid aside the besetting sin. For the plaited hair and the meretricious gold she had put on the precious ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. She had taken up her cross and followed Christ, and ministered to Him of her substance; and when all others had forsaken Him, when the owner of the garden was perhaps feasting his friends in Arimathea; when Peter and John had turned and gone home; when the other women had fled for fear, trembling and amazed; whilst the Watch had shrunk into the city, and the Apostles were doubting, and disbelieving, and calling it all "an idle tale,"

the Magdalen still wept over the grave of Jesus, till in very pity he whispered "Mary," and showed Himself alive from the dead.

We might gather from this simple memoir many useful lessons bearing directly upon that charitable Cause which we this day meet to stimulate. I shall content myself with suggesting one, and one only, for our morning's meditation.

We learn from the gracious sympathy thus accorded by the Saviour to the Magdalen, that deadly as was this woman's sin, yet it was not necessarily a sin unto death. There was room for repentance even here—room for forgiveness—aye, room for exercise of the tenderest compassion and the purest love. And why should I remind you of this? If we read the Gospel message aright we draw from it the consolation, the inexpressible comfort, that every sin save one, save blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, is capable of remission. Now sensuality—impurity—is not blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. It may lead to that crime. It is not the crime itself. We accept with thankfulness the rich promise, that in the fountain opened for all uncleanness scarlet sins shall be washed white; and that to the crimson sinner, when humbled, the golden sceptre of mercy shall be held forth.

And yet there is a difficulty, to some minds insuperable, in some amounting almost to a reluctance, to realise the recovery of a fallen woman. The height from which she has cast herself is so dizzy, the blow so stunning, the degradation so complete, that we are tempted to despair of one by her own choice so utterly cut off and cut away from us. Her spiritual life, we argue, must be extinct. In the old familiar home they never mention her name; even the edge of parental affection is blunted; her sisters are taught to forget her; her brothers proscribe her memory. She is abhorred of her acquaintance. Friends pass by on the other side. Her own sex shrink from her instinctively. Men dread to risk their reputation by recognising her. And we may not wonder at it; for even the commissioned Minister, who is sent for that very purpose, in Christ's stead and in Christ's name, to find the lost sheep, to call back the aliens, and to beseech them to be reconciled to God—even

he, the Lord's priest, too often, and, as I venture to think, too scrupulously, hesitates here. He fortifies himself behind some text of scripture—"Can this Ethiopian change her skin? If there were a chance, however remote, a possibility, however vague—but one might as well write words in water, as expect to make an impression on that steel-plated heart. Is she not working out all uncleanness with greediness? The Spirit is quenched within her: resisted, and so fled—hopelessly, irrevocably fled. She is literally and in its truest sense 'an abandoned woman.' I will not waste my strength in a vain attempt to bring living water out of this barren rock."

And when all others have thus flung her aside and deserted her, shall we wonder if the outcast flings herself aside, despairs of herself, and in the agony of that desperation plunges deeper and deeper into wretchedness of living. "O but," says the world, "she is lost—shame, principle, conscience, hope, all is gone—there is nothing left to work upon." And each syllable of that withering sentence falls upon the culprit's ear. She measures it all, and believes it true. You may hear her muttering it in her broken sleep—"lost—lost—shame, principle, conscience, hope—all is gone, there is nothing left to work upon!"

But is it true? I mean absolutely and in all cases true? There are benevolent men who have sifted this question very closely, and have arrived at a very opposite result. "Their horror of themselves," says one of them, writing of this class of transgressors, "and their desire to escape from the thralldom of the seven devils, is widely spread, and is profound." I do not for an instant doubt it. I can believe of the woman that she tries in a thousand ways to drown the thought of her infamy. I do not believe, that she is permitted commonly to succeed. I do not believe the eye of her soul to be so utterly blinded as to have no glimpses of a coming Judgment. I will not credit it, that she can have so hardened herself to all the emotions of the human heart, as never to be stirred at the sound of a Sabbath bell, or the sight of a Sabbath worshipper: never startled at the sudden death of a partner in sin: never to have a vision of her own winding sheet: never to ponder upon the great gulf between her and those of her sex who are

living soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world: never to moan restlessly upon a feverish pillow, thinking of home, and the early days of her innocence; of the mother who watched her childhood with such devotion and love, of the father whose heart was broken by her fall: and so to pass into wild haunting dreams of worms that never die, and flames that are never quenched, till she screams, may be, aloud in the anguish of her sleepless sleep, and the drops stand thick upon her brow.

Oh, my brethren, "there is no peace"—my God saith it—"there is no peace to the wicked." "The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt." They *cannot* rest: that is the merciful provision of Heaven. Anything better for them than that they should: anything better than that moral coma, the sure precursor of spiritual death. Rather let them wander up and down in dry places seeking rest: rather let their sin pursue them, an untiring, unrelenting avenger. Who knows but it may drive them at last to some door of repentance? some door that shall open wider as they approach it? some avenue through which they may catch a sight of the skirts of a Saviour's robe; may press in; may throw themselves at His feet; kiss His feet, and anoint them with the ointment, and stand behind Him weeping; and weep and weep, until for their very importunity He shall mercifully accept their repentance, and bid them "go in peace?"

Mary of Magdala, when thou thus enteredst unbidden into the presence of Infinite Purity, was the face of Jesus turned from thee? Didst thou find thy Master harsh and stern? Did He refuse thy touch? Did He spurn thee from His side? Did He say to Simon and his assembled guests, "Don't suffer this wretched creature to approach Me, she is a sinner?" God forbid the thought! Christ is all love! My beloved, He is the incarnation of love. Love is the pulse of His heart. Love is the soul of His being. Love is the divine expression of His countenance. Love is the gracious utterance of His lips. As a babe, He cried in the cradle in love. As a man, He wept in His wanderings in love. As a prophet, He warned and taught in love. As a king, He rules in love. As

living, He breathed love. As dying, He gasped love. As buried, He preached love to the spirits in prison. As risen again—He returned to Mary.

Now, if we might for a moment imagine our blessed Lord still to be on earth; if we might without irreverence conceive of Him to be healing our sick, teaching personally in our streets and preaching the gospel to our poor, still on His errand of mercy seeking and saving that which is lost; if we might venture thus to realise His visible bodily presence amongst us, might we not also go one step farther; might we not say, and that without charge of presumption, that He would now be here—in this temple—with this congregation—the soul and centre of this Association, whose one self-imposed task it is to cast the devils out of possessed women, and to bring the Magdalens to Christ? Is there any mission-field upon which the healthful Spirit of His grace would more surely fall, than upon this?

And shall we doubt, my brethren, that He is with us, not in heart only and in affection only, but in presence also at this moment? Surely if ever two or three were gathered together in His name, they are so now. In a few minutes we shall be with Him at His holy table. We shall draw very near to Him in faith. We shall spiritually eat of His flesh and drink of His blood. He will be to us meat indeed and drink indeed in that most comfortable Sacrament. He will make Himself known, I trust, to each of us in the breaking of bread. We shall be one with Him and He with us; and that is a poor, weak, bewitched, foolish, Galatian eye of incredulity, before which Jesus Christ is not evidently set forth at this moment present among us.

There are other reasons, and a thousand reasons, why He Who first showed Himself to Mary should specially bless the labours of this Society, and guide it into all truth; but for this reason not the last and not the least, that (in the words of the first clause of your Report)“it has helped to show how woman’s faith and woman’s sympathy may be enlisted in one of the highest works of Christian charity.” It is a peculiarity of that work that it cannot be carried on effectively without an Association. The isolated agency of individuals may do

something, and the smallest contribution to the stock of public morality is most thankfully to be received. Startling and stirring appeals to collected multitudes may do something. With all our heart we wish them "God speed." But these are spasmodic efforts: they have no element of permanence: too often they throw false lights of sentiment round the dark body of sin: and there is no sort of misdoers who require to be dealt with more definitely, more methodically, less sentimentally. They are all creatures of impulse. By impulse they first started in their evil course. By impulse they may be arrested for a space. But the same impulsive nature remains, ready to sweep them back into perdition. And "if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning."

You must therefore work with them upon a plan. You must deal with them separately, as Jesus dealt with Mary separately. You must bring them tenderly, but with fixed purpose, under a yoke of discipline. You must test the reality of their penitence, and you must deepen it and direct it with careful observation and unremitting diligence. You must detach their ill-balanced minds from every disturbing weight; hedge them round with influences for good: impregnate the very atmosphere with a breath of sanctity and purity. You must lead them gently into green pastures, and beside the waters of comfort. You must place a man of God at their side, one who is skilled to minister to minds diseased, one in whom they shall have confidence to unburthen the secret of their heart. You must send chosen women of God to talk with them, and to read to them, and to pray with them, and familiarise them once again with the contact of all that is pure and modest and virtuous. You must assemble them daily in the consecrated chapel: make them feel the contiguity of Deity: teach them that this is no other than the House of God and the gate of Heaven, and so lead them step by step to the horns of the altar. You must provide them opportunities for retirement and solitude, that they may commune with their own hearts in their chamber,





